The American Leonardo: The Life of Samuel F. B. Morse. By CARLETON MABEE. (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1943. Pp. xv, 420. $5.00)

Samuel Finley Breese Morse has been fortunate in securing a biographer of such competence and charm. In one sense, Morse was typical of the early American artist who could paint a picture, stuff a bird, pull a tooth, devise an invention or sell tin ware at almost one and the same time. Charles Willson Peale was a naturalist, inventor, painter, watch maker, and many other things; John Wesley Jarvis, the bibulous painter, was also a sculptor, inventor, and raconteur. Robert Fulton, of steamship fame, was a miniature painter. In those days, before knowledge became so vast and specialized, the creative mind, which could command nimble fingers, was likely to produce almost anything, and quite frequently did.

But it would be a serious error to regard Morse as merely "typical." True he studied under Benjamin West in England, as did many others; he was only one of some three thousand early American portrait painters; he, like many another Northern portraitist, did well professionally in the South; he was possibly our earliest American daguerreotypist, but his interest in the new invention was shared with many another of his professional colleagues.

None of these interest would, in the wildest flights of fancy, qualify him for the title of "American Leonardo." And yet, if anyone deserves that name, no one is better entitled to it than is Morse. He was a painter, politician, writer, and inventor. But the two mighty achievements which link our age to his, and make of us his debtors are (1) the founding of the National Academy of Design, and (2) the development of the electro-magnetic telegraph.

Many others assisted in founding the National Academy of Design, but who can gain say that Morse was at once its leading member and its most vigorous defender. As a result, for well over a century, that

Academy has helped to train successive generations of American artists and to give renown to those who win it.

To say that virtually all the great discoveries have been made, almost simultaneously, by independent students, is true, but trite. That there were other contenders for Morse's laurels as inventor of the electric telegraph, and that he was sometimes ungenerous to those who had contributed to the success of the instrument, does not alter the fact that we had a practical, electro-magnetic telegraph when we did, more largely through Morse's efforts and sacrifices than those of any other man.

The founding of the National Academy and the development of the electric telegraph are the two sun-lit peaks of Morse's career. Between, are the valleys and the shadows. His hatred of the Roman Catholic church, his somewhat-to-limited acceptance of the principles of democracy; his participation in a "Nativist" movement in opposition to his foreign-born fellow Americans, all are better forgotten than remembered.

The book itself is handsomely and durably bound. There are twenty-two good illustrations, mainly of paintings by the artist-inventor, and an index of fifteen pages. Unfortunately, the book contains no bibliography.

Mr. Mabee has spared no pains to seek out the haunts of Morse, to search out the paintings and writings of his subject, as well as to examine and evaluate an untold mass of materials by or relating to the great telegrapher. He writes with skill and with high good taste. He paints in light, shadow, and chiaroscuro. If there are errors worth mentioning, they escapsed the attention of this reviewer. In short, if anyone wants to read an absorbing biography, written with skill and good judgment, this is quite the book to get.

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